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RUEHGO/AMEMBASSY RANGOON PRIORITY 2293
RUEHUL/AMEMBASSY SEOUL PRIORITY 6814
RUEHVN/AMEMBASSY VIENTIANE PRIORITY 1664
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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 TOKYO 005626

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 12/19/2017

TAGS: [PREL](#) [SK](#) [JA](#)

SUBJECT: INITIAL JAPANESE REACTIONS TO SOUTH KOREAN ELECTION

Classified By: Deputy Chief of Mission Joe Donovan for reasons 1.4(b) and (d)

11. (C) SUMMARY: Japanese MOFA officials are pleased by the election of Lee Myung Bak as South Korea's next president and are hopeful that relations between Tokyo and Seoul will improve during his administration. They expect him to focus primarily on improving the South's economy and believe he will downplay nationalistic and historical complaints about Japan. There is a good possibility, they believe, that if invited, Prime Minister Fukuda would attend President Lee's inauguration. Academics and Korea-watchers also agree, in general, that relations between Japan and Korea are poised to improve. END SUMMARY.

MOFA PLEASED BY ELECTION RESULTS

12. (C) Japanese MOFA officials are pleased by the election of Lee Myung Bak to be South Korea's next president, according to Takeshi Akahori, Director of MOFA's Japan-Korea Economic Affairs Division. He told Embassy Tokyo Political Officer that "frankly, both Japan and the U.S. have been waiting for this." In public, Japan will say that the ROK is an important neighbor which shares the same basic values as Japan, and that Tokyo looks forward to forging a good relationship with the new leadership. In private, Tokyo's message to Seoul will be that Japan hopes for a "forward-looking, future-oriented" relationship with the Lee administration. Akahori said Japan has been disappointed by the Roh administration's tendency to raise points of friction and to always blame former Prime Minister Koizumi for all that is wrong with the relationship. Accordingly,

expectations for Lee are high.

13. (C) Akahori focused on the fact that during Lee's campaign speeches he pledged that his main focus will be, first, on improving the economy, and second, improving relations with Korea's Asian partners, beginning with Japan. MOFA takes this as a message of Lee's willingness to improve relations. That said, Akahori pointed out Lee said very little explicitly about Japan during the campaign, hoping to avoid accusations that he is too "pro-Japanese" due to the fact that he was born here. Observers in MOFA expect, said Akahori, that Lee will first focus on improving relations with the United States and will turn later to Japan. In fact, Akahori continued, Lee is not pro-Japan. He may have developed a number of business partners here over the years, but does not feel any strong connection to Japan, nor has Japan ever been one of his priorities. This view was mirrored in a press report by Nikkei pointing out that Lee has had very limited contacts with Japanese politicians over the years.

14. (C) The Japanese believe that Lee will remain true to his pledge to focus first on the economy. Akahori predicts one of Lee's first priorities will be to finalize the U.S.- Korea FTA, and that he will follow this up by focusing on FTAs with the E.U. and China. Next on his list would be working to negotiate an FTA-EPA with Japan. Akahori is of the opinion that Lee's "747" pledge is too ambitious and that his promises to address the issue of poverty will collide with his need to cultivate strong ties with business interests in order to realize his goal of attaining a steady seven percent

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GDP growth rate. However, Akahori is hopeful that Lee can revive the Korean economy and that relations with Japan can help play a positive role in this. If this is the case, Lee will have less reason to revert to playing the nationalistic, history-based Japan card that is often relied upon by Korean leaders to revive flagging support.

15. (C) On the Six Party Talks, Akahori said Japan believes Lee's approach seems to be well balanced and much closer to Japan's than was the case with President Roh. While improving relations with the North is important, Lee's primary priority is the denuclearization of the peninsula, and his proposal that the international community contribute USD 40 billion in aid to the North when it denuclearizes is realistic. Akahori also wondered aloud whether Lee's approach to the North and the fact that his views on this issue seem more in synch with those of Japan and the U.S. might lead to the revitalization of the Trilateral Coordination Group (TCOG) which has become moribund since 2003.

ACADEMICS ALSO PREDICT IMPROVED RELATIONS

16. (C) Academics we've spoken with echo Akahori's views. Former Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs and current Fellow at the Japan Center for International Exchange, Hitoshi Tanaka, told Embassy Tokyo Bilat Unit Chief that relations between South Korea and Japan have soured recently not so much due to personalities as to divergences on policy goals toward the DPRK. He is hopeful that with Prime Minister Fukuda's more pragmatic approach to this issue, and to Lee's more moderate approach that relations can improve. He also believes that U.S. - ROK - Japan relations need to improve. While not fond of the TCOG process, he asserts that we need to strengthen the trilateral relationship in order to better coordinate policy, not only on the DPRK, but also on wider regional issues, such as China, regional architecture, and the maintenance of peace and stability.

17. (C) Hajime Izumi, Korea expert and professor at Shizuoka University, also agrees that Lee's election should make it

easier to work on a trilateral basis. He observed to us that although Lee is not well known in Japan as a politician, his pragmatic, business-oriented background will likely lead him to take steps to improve relations. Izumi predicts Lee will not make any major changes in policy vis-a-vis the DPRK. He also remarked on the lack of nationalism or anti-America/anti-Japan sentiment during the election campaign and said he believes the younger generation in Korea is not so wrapped up with historical issues but rather more interested in steps Lee can take to improve the economy. Izumi also pointed out that although Lee was born in Japan, he was a leader in anti-Japan normalization demonstrations in 1964. However, he subsequently had a change of heart. Izumi related that during a conference to commemorate the 30 year anniversary of the demonstrations, Lee told him that the demonstrations had been a mistake, and that normalization of relations with Japan and the resulting economic assistance was the trigger for Korea's "economic miracle." Finally, Izumi hopes that although Lee seems less likely to play the anti-Japan card that many of his predecessors have, he is a bit nervous about the upcoming 100th anniversary in 2010 of Japan's annexation of Korea, and hopes emotions will not run

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hot in either country.

18. (C) Keio University Professor Masao Okonogi shares Izumi's views that the younger generation in Korea is not caught up with the historical aspects of relations with Japan and that growing business, personal, and cultural ties between the two countries is leading to better relations. He believes Lee will want to improve ties with Japan and told us, as a member of PM Fukuda's foreign policy advisory panel, he has urged PM Fukuda to take advantage of this opportunity and to attend Lee's inauguration. (NOTE: There has already been speculation in the press that Fukuda will attend the inauguration. MOFA's Akahori, for his part, questioned why Korean presidents invite foreign dignitaries to their inaugurations, but said that if Lee does invite Fukuda, he thinks there is a "good chance" Fukuda would attend. END NOTE.)

19. (C) Seo Won-Cheoi, Director-General of the Association of (South) Koreans Resident in Japan's International Relations Bureau told us improved Japanese-Korean relations do not hinge on Lee's election. Rather, he asserted, it is up to the Japanese to decide on the nature of the relationship. He said relations were fine until former Prime Ministers Koizumi and Abe came along, so now it is up to PM Fukuda to either fix or further ruin the bilateral relationship. He was very critical of Japan's (and America's) tough stance on the DPRK, which he asserted have hurt the interests of many South Koreans living here.

COMMENT

110. (C) Lee's election as president of Korea, coupled with PM Fukuda's less dogmatic approach to the South, offers the possibility of further rapprochement between the two neighbors. Lee will focus on growing the economy and is likely to look to Japan to participate and assist, albeit indirectly, in this process. As long as the economy improves, he will have little need to shore up support by appealing to nationalist sentiments by bashing Japan. We sense that Japan will work toward improved relations both bilaterally and, with us, trilaterally. END COMMENT.

SCHIEFFER